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Trinity House and the Formation of the Modern British State

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A primary function of the lighthouse has always been to aid navigation and trade. Prior to the invention of the compass it was necessary for ships to hug the coastline, aided by *portlans* or *rutters*, to avoid running aground. Phoenician traders possibly constructed the earliest lighthouse at Cadiz in the 5th century BC, but the lighthouse is later connected to nation and empire building projects. A network of lighthouses around the Mediterranean supported the expansion of the Roman Empire, with their earliest lighthouse in the British Isles most likely located at the naval fort of Portus Dubris (Dover).

For powerful elites, maritime trade presented a valuable opportunity to boost the coffers. In Britain, as early as 1261, the collection of tolls or duties from traders was established to provide for the construction and maintenance of new lighthouses (Hague and Christie, 1975). This connection between light and governance is affirmed through the historical development of the lighthouse, particularly within the British context (Otter, 2008).

Medieval British waters were a lawless space, endangered by physical hazards and by wild and chaotic people, smugglers, wreckers, pirates, and the vessels of suspicious *foreign sailors*. Lighthouses were often private or voluntary affairs, and their operation was subject to much corruption. Often serving as moneymaking scams, lighthouses became sites of ‘tenacious avarice’ whereby owners derived income by extracting dues from passing vessels (Hague and Christie, 1975: 36), thus diverting taxes away from the Government. An unregulated coast not only jeopardised the safety of mariners, but also posed a threat to trade and potentially national security.

The Brotherhood of Trinity House of Deptford Strond (est. 1514) was the first charitable organisation to be granted a Royal Charter, initially to support the families of men lost at sea and mariners fallen on hard times. In 1536, however, the Brethren at Newcastle-upon-Tyne shouldered the responsibility for building and maintaining lighthouses at North Shields. Its members understood that promoting the safety of ships also served their fiscal interests. The 1566 Seamarks Act extended these powers across the country, granting Trinity House the authority to construct lighthouses and – in effect – establish a state monopoly on the coastal infrastructure designed to aid navigation. Legislation in 1836 abolished private lighthouses, placing all lighthouses and seamarks under state control and the central administration of

Trinity House. Funded through a system of *light dues* and *user fees*, Trinity House became an early provider of a public good, creating a free service at point of access to all users (Lindberg, 2009). Thus lighthouses are integral to a historical narrative describing how the establishment of public administration and taxation aided the transformation of Britain from a feudal system to a modern State.

Under the auspices of Trinity House, lighthouses became part of a nautical network promoting the regulation and standardisation of shipping practices in British and imperial waters through enhanced risk management and the mitigation of excessive insurance claims. As Hannah Conway observes in this book, multiple shipping losses prompted Faraday in 1860 to persuade The Royal Institution that the safety and regulation provided by lighthouses were of great societal importance. And it was clear that ensuring consistent finance and maintenance through a standardised system also supported the functional performance of lighthouses, in terms of their durability and reliability.

The export of the pioneering designs of Joseph Smeaton across the British Empire soon established this iconic lighthouse form as a beacon of the imperial centre, imprinting British colonial power across the oceans. Simultaneously, the direction of seaborne traffic into safe channels and routes also represented a broader territorial organisation of Britain's inshore/offshore areas into distinct zones, boundaries and networks, a land and waterscape familiar to many via BBC Radio 4's *The Shipping Forecast*. Whereas ships previously had to put to anchor when darkness fell, night-time navigation enabled vessels to sail on, vastly reducing journey times (Otter, 2008). By facilitating greater speed and efficiency of international travel, Jakle (2001) suggests that lighthouses are aligned with a 'new age of travel': part of a pantheon of lighting apparatus produced in Britain, Europe and the USA to facilitate economic and social 'progress'.

The economic consequences of the new technologies and infrastructures that emerged from the Industrial Revolution were clear. With the growing authority of Trinity House, there was an expansion of overseas trade and seaborne industries which underpinned the economic growth of Britain as a trading nation and imperial power. The 1819 Reciprocity Treaty, for example, regulated against excessive lighthouse tolls, removing a key barrier to free trade.

There is also a political dimension connecting lighthouses to the process of nation building. As visible territorial markers, and as technologies of surveillance and control, these structures became symbols of state authority and power. The USA, for example, adopted not only the

technological innovations pioneered in Britain, but, following the 1789 Lighthouses Act, American lighthouses came under federal control (Miller, 2010). By 1907, the US government had created its own network of '1495 lighthouses and automated beacons and sixty lightships' (Jackle, 2001: 188), to establish a visible presence of federal government as part of an American nation-building project. Ultimately, the governance and regulation of lighthouses is bound to the formation of modern nation States.

Today, Trinity House is a multi-functional organisation acting as the General Lighthouse Authority (GLA) and Deep Sea Pilotage Authority (DPSA) for UK waters and Gibraltar, as well as continuing to provide charitable welfare and other forms of support for mariners.

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